

When Sally Swims Poorly...  
How Mom and Dad Might Talk To Their Child at a Swim Meet

Swim Meet conversation between parent and athlete can be either highly productive, or highly counter-productive. Your goal as a parent should be to contribute to a positive swim meet experience for your child. This is the same goal as shared by the coach and the athlete. It is important that all three sides of the triangle be working together on meet days, as well as the rest of the swim year.

As I travel the country talking to parents, and observing swim meets and the effects of individual athletes, a few things stand out for comment. The inter-relationship of athlete, coach and parent on the days of swim meets is one of the most important. To discuss this adequately, it is necessary to define the role of each person.

The athlete attends the meet to attempt to gain, or affirm some progress that has been made in their development. This may take the form of a personal best time, or holding a stroke technique together for an entire race, or executing accurately a particular strategy for "splitting" the race, or any of a multitude of other possibilities and combinations. The role of the athlete is the active one. It is up to them to perform, and the meet day is a selected time to perform the experiment.

The role of the coach on meet day needs to be thoroughly understood. It is dependent upon how the coach has presented themselves in the athlete's swimming career. Primarily, for most coaches, they are the technical resource that a swimmer depends upon to help them improve. They also serve as a role model, and to a greater or lesser extent, as a motivator, friend, and co-author of the strategy or experiment being performed on that day.

The parent is the racing "support crew". The parent makes sure they have all their human needs attended to, and continues their parental function of supervising personal development. Their love, attention, and caring are key ingredients in creating a successful experience on race day.

Athlete, technical support, and human support. That's all it takes.

Now, back to the question of meet conversation. Lots of talk goes on at a meet, and coming and going around the meet. Let's focus on the conversations that go on around a particular swim, and see what can be learned from that item.

Sally Smith is eleven years old, and she is about to swim the 100 yard freestyle. Sally is a pretty good little swimmer, and has a best time of 1:01.3. She'd like to go a personal best time in this event at the Oskosh By Gosh Meet, and she and her coach, Rita Bobeeta, have been talking all week about how Sally has to concentrate on keeping her stroke long and strong during the last 25 yards of her race.

Now, the race has been seeded in the bullpen (interesting name, huh?) and the swimmers have been released until they swim. Sally knows she is supposed to stop and talk to Rita before she swims. She goes over to see her.

"Hey Kiddo, ready for the big swim?"

"Rita, I got it all under control, and I'm ready to go fast."

"What do you need to remember on this swim?"

"To keep my stroke long on the last twenty-five."

"Not just long, but...."

"long and Strong!"

"Right! Have a real good swim now. Go get it!"

Sally blasts off, and gets out in front immediately. Mom and Dad cheer like crazy. Sally turns for home, and.....

(Now, at this point let's consider two endings. We will take a look at each one.)

Sally turns for home and..... shortens her stroke bit by bit as she gets more and more tired, and struggles to the wall, with a time of 1:01.5.

Sally is disappointed, and she goes back to Rita choking back tears, and stands there, waiting for Rita to speak.

"Well, not quite what we wanted. How did it feel?"

"It felt awful! I was terrible! I couldn't do anything!"

"From here, it looked like you were only pushing through to your waist, and towards the end of the race maybe not even that far. Where should your hand finish?"

"At my suitline."

"And what did your arms really feel like?"

"I got all hot and my arms were burning at the end of the race."

"Do you know why that is? I think you haven't had enough good fast pace work yet. Next month, we'll work on that, and by the Billabong Open, you'll be much better!"

Sally leaves Rita happy and feeling much less like the Ugly Duckling. Now, she heads to see Mom and Dad.

Most parents I talk to, think that this is a tough time to deal with their children. It isn't! (The tough one is next.) All Mom and Dad have to do in this case, is two simple things:

First, deal with human things.

"Are you warm enough, honey?"

"Put on your warmups, and your towel"

"Do you need something to drink?"

Then, if all is well, STOP. Do not get into the race unless the child wants to. That is not your role. You are there to support.

But let's say that Sally comes back and says....

"I Stunk!"

Mom and Dad say, "Stunk? Stunk means you smelled badly. All that chlorine is kind of nasty, but I wouldn't say you stunk. What do you really mean?"

After Sally has a chance to get rid of her emotional response, you should ask, "What did Coach Bobeeta say?"

Now is a good time to explore this. What you are trying to do, as a parent, is duplicate the same mind-set the coach is trying to re-instill. Analyze what went wrong with the experiment. You don't have the technical expertise to offer the answers that Coach Rita does, but by asking questions that require a technical response, you shift Sally out of the emotional context. This is nothing more than an experiment that did not turn out the way you wanted it to. This is perfect swim parenting. You reinforce the message that the coach is sending.

If you will simply take care of the human needs, and shift the emotional disappointment to an analytical response, all will be well in Sally's world.

## When Sally Swims Great... How Mom and Dad Might Talk To Their Child at a Swim Meet

In a previous article we explored the parental conversation when Sally had experienced what she thought was a "bad" swim. She was unhappy with the result of that experiment, and we listened in as her Coach, Rita Bobeeta, and her parents, appropriately brought her back to a better perspective by putting her into an evaluative mind-set that analyzed why her race (her experiment!) did not end as she wanted it to. This response defused a situation that parents sometimes feel is one of the more difficult ones that they have to cope with in swimming.

I also said that there was another situation that was potentially much more damaging, that parents (and coaches) frequently do not recognize.

That situation is an "embarrassment of riches", or what happens when sudden, overwhelming success is the result. Lets go back and see the situation with Sally.

In this version of her 100 freestyle swim, Sally comes home with a very strong and fast last 25, and goes a new personal best time. In fact, it is a wonderful swim, a 58.9, dropping her previous best time by 2.7 seconds!

Now what happens?

Sally hops out of the water without further ado, and immediately looks for her Coach, Rita Bobeeta. Rita is easy to find, as she too is ecstatic, jumping around on the pool deck, cheering and happy.

"Sally, that was Fantastic! I can't believe you dropped almost three seconds! I've never had another swimmer do that! Wonderful! You can be so happy, and so proud of yourself!"

Sally beams with pleasure, and missing the rest of Rita's comments, begins to look for Mom and Dad. Finding them in the stands, jumping around and waving to her, they are clearly very excited for her! She runs up to see them.

"Sally that was Amazing! Mrs. Jones said she never saw anyone drop that much in the 100 before! I can't believe it! You are incredible!"

Well, you say, that sounds fine. Mom is excited, and happy for Sally, and Sally must feel good to hear all this good stuff from her coach and Sally.

Not so.

The key is in watching what happens to Sally next. She finally walks away from Mom and Dad, thinking the following:

"Wow, that was some hot swim! Rita and Mom and even Dad said it was awesome, unbelievable, fantastic, amazing! That was special. I don't even remember much of it. But it was amazing. I'm amazed. I can't believe I did it, myself. Wow, I wonder what I'll do next time! Gee, I hope I can do at least that well again, because that was a pretty unbelievable swim. Rita said it was fantastic. Like a dream. Unreal. It seems kind of unreal. How did I do that?"

Well folks, the next time Sally swims the 100 free, you can bet dollars against donuts that she'll revert to a time in her 1:00-1:01 range, if not worse. Why? Because the three people who she most respects in swimming have told her that the 58.9 was "unbelievable", "fantastic", "amazing", and "incredible". They must be right.

So Sally doesn't believe it. It was a fantasy. She is amazed how she, an ordinary person could actually have done such a thing. She finds it unworthy of credibility also. And so she goes back to what she CAN see as credible, a 1:00-1:01 time.

Often swimmers become trapped on a plateau after one really excellent (and precocious) swim for months or even years. We have to be careful of the language we use, because frequently those who put their faith in us, believe everything we say.

What should Coach Rita and Mom and Dad have done in this situation? If you said "stick with the analysis approach", you are correct.

Remember, a swim in a meet is an experiment. If it turns out the way you want it to, you are entitled to a short emotionally satisfying "celebration". Then swimmer, parent, and coach need to analyze WHY it went well.

"What did you do right? How did it feel to do it right? Remember."

Coach Rita and Mom and Dad need to:

- offer congratulations,
- ask questions that bring out the technical analysis by the athlete,
- assure the athlete that they are just touching the surface of what they are capable of.

Coach Rita might say,

"Sally, Nice Swim! That looked like the Sally Smith I know! Very strong last twenty five. Why was that?"

"I remembered to push through to my suitline, and keep my strokes long and strong!"

"Superb. That was technically excellent. Now next time, we'll work on getting the first twenty five out a little bit faster, and you can improve some more. Nice swim. Now get ready for your next swim. 50 back I think. What do you need to remember there?"

And when Sally sees Mom and Dad,

"Sally, I'll bet you are really happy with that! You looked really good. What did Rita say? And where is your towel?"

The "what did Rita say?" is a subtle reversion to the technical side that is excellent.

This way, Sally gets to be happy, is aware of what made her perform better, and goes away confident that more improvement is to come.

Conversations between athletes and parents, and athletes and coaches can be wonderfully effective at swim meets. Work hard on hearing things clearly, and responding with appropriate comments, and you'll really contribute to your child's happiness in swimming. Good luck.